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ABSTRACT

The author examines the characteristics of aesthetic factors operative in theatrical art. He views the theatrical event as an auditory, graphic, and kinetic stimulus complex derived from prolonged, violent, emotional situations. The theatrical event is conceptualized as a sign process in which a specific line of dialogue or piece of action functions in a dual manner--cognitively to identify the stage situation and aesthetically to evoke spectator response to the art on its own terms. The author concludes that the theatrical director must not be content to treat characters, events, motives, or dialogues as terminal considerations, but as part of an aesthetic "whole" with inherent, appreciable values. (Author/RN)

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The Aesthetic Dimension of the Theatrical Event: A Practical View

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The Aesthetic Dimension of the Theatrical Event: A Practical View

A consideration of aesthetic factors in the light of such practical matters as dramatic production and audience response requires a measure of definition beyond that provided by traditional questions concerning the nature of aesthetics. As Victorino Tejera rightly suggests, it is more important to inquire into what art does than to pursue taxonomic questions concerning the nature of aesthetics.[1]

1. Victorino Tejera, Art and Human Intelligence, (New York, N.Y.: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965), p. 50.

Tejera's question becomes, then, not "What is aesthetics?", but "What is the way art objects, as a special class of material things, enter into and engage perception?" For those whose concern is the staged dramatic event, the question becomes: "What are the operative aesthetic factors in theatrical art, and what characterizes the perception of, and response to, a theatrical event as art object?"

Since the phenomena of sensation and perception are central to the above question, their role in the theatrical event and their relationship to the aesthetic response must become the point of departure in any attempt to relate practical aspects of play-making and dramaturgy to the province of aesthetics. Sensation, fundamentally, is a matter of energy change, with human sensitivity to stimuli changing as it needs to. For example, under constant stimulation or constant sensory input, receptors exhibit decreasing sensitivity to stimuli and, as result, the experience becomes less intense.[2] Since the theatrical event is an

2. Bernard Berelson and Gary A. Steiner, Human Behavior: An Inventory of Scientific Findings (New York, N.Y.: Harcourt Brace and World, Inc., 1964), p. 93.

auditory, graphic and kinetic stimulus complex, one often derived from prolonged, violent, emotional situations, the matter of receptor sensitivity, obviously, plays a critical role in the spectator's response. The theatre practitioner

might do well to consider also that the size of the least detectable change or increment in the intensity of a stimulus is a function of its initial intensity.[3]

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[3] IBID., p. 95.

There is no escaping Weber's Law $\left(\frac{\Delta I}{I}=k\right)$ which establishes that subjective discriminations are not bound to absolute characteristics of stimuli, but to relations between them. Given Weber's Constant, a high level stimulus (such as the tortured outpourings of a Medea or the frenetic business of a farce) requires a mathematically greater degree of change than a low level stimulus if differences in its basic pattern are to be detected. There is little doubt of the implication that has for those who work for variety in a scene. When the director or actor, or both, pitch the intensity of the scene too high, it may preclude the sensory differentiation necessary to discovery of the relationships of the elements of the medium upon which an aesthetic response can be predicated. While, obviously, there are other facts about the phenomenon of sensation which have a bearing on the aesthetic response potential of a production, hopefully, the one's cited will indicate the relationship I am attempting to suggest.

The matter of perception becomes an even more complex problem for the theatre director seeking an aesthetic response to the object he creates. Raw sensory data -- the sights and sounds -- are themselves insufficient to produce in the spectator a coherent picture of either the actual world or the fabricated world of the stage event. Sensory information does not correspond simply to the perception that underlies it. The sensory impulses do not act on an empty organism; they interact with predispositions and states already there.[4] Then too, all of the stimuli capable of firing the receptors do not become a part of the perceptive experience.[5]

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[4] IBID., p. 100

[5] IBID.

Several factors operate to determine which stimuli or conbinations of stimuli will be experienced. For instance, some stimuli will be perceived at the expense of others because of their differential nature or quality. We have little choice, therefore, but to insure that theatrical stimuli are given definiteness of form, and that the critical stimuli in a stage act contrast sufficiently with preceding or simultaneous stimuli.

Stimulus selection also involves the observer's previous experience and the expectations it produces. Spectators attend to aspects of the stage environment they anticipate, and they are more likely to anticipate things with which they are familiar. That would suggest, for one thing, that the actor's ability to couch character responses in recognizable terms can have a critical bearing on any possible aesthetic response to the work. More specifically, it supports the late Max Parrish's plea for the performer's mastery of the conventional elocutionary patterns which insure recognition of content.[6] If acting is to function as art,

6. Wayland Maxfield Parrish, "Elocution - A Definition and a Challenge," reprinted in Speech and Drama, VII, Number 1 (July, 1957), p. 6.

elocution cannot be a dirty word. In fact, the perceptual facillitation and control which elocution provides may be the secret to the high aesthetic potential a Paul Scofield injects into a scene in the course of his poetically oriented treatment of it.

In considering the relationship which the selective perception of stimuli has to the theatrical event, it should be noted also that the sensory experience is organized by the receiver.[7] Moreover, the perceived characteristics of any

7. Berelson and Steiner, Human Behavior, p. 104

part of the experience are a function of the whole to which the part appears to belong. That being the case, a special committment to the matter of form becomes a necessity. As we shall see later, the form of the theatrical event is intimately related to the desired aesthetic response. Consequently, the separate stimuli which combine to produce its configuration must be perceptually organized so as to insure, not merely an awareness of plot and character details, but an awareness of the precise identities and relationships of the stimuli as form ingredients. If not, they become extraneous elements -- aesthetic non-sequiturs, if you will -- which, although dynamic, emotive, or even true to life, limit the possibility of an aesthetic response. In the artistically successful production, the general character of the form (the whole) is made sufficiently clear to insure accurate perceptive awareness of each of the form's constituant parts and their functional relationships within the form. The theatre artist must not be content to make characters, events, motives or dialogue terminal considerations and treat them simply as narrative or psychological details. He must insure that the spectator organizes the sensory experience so as to perceive these production elements as form ingredients.

While there are other laws of perception which might be investigated and applied, it is essential to proceed with an examination of some <u>additional factors</u>. As a living analogue to some aspect of man, the theatrical event also becomes a particularly unique sign process. Its linguistic signs, its graphic signs, and its para-linguistic signs, do, of course, operate in the traditional communicative sense. They serve as a system whereby cognitive and emotive meanings can be encoded. We should not overlook, however, that in their relation to the form structure of the play, they also function as aesthetic signs. That fact involves more than simply a dual use of the sign. The character of the sign itself is distinct in each of the roles. When the sign is used traditionally to communicate data, there is a point at which it is functionally exhausted. To illustrate, if the

word "flag" is used as a verbal sign in the traditional communicative sense, its functional life is transitory. Once it has been perceived it is useless, empty, ignored; mentally the listener proceeds to those associations and meanings the sign has triggered. And, even though used to another end or for another percipient, the sign vehicle itself is value-less. Any value factor which might be said to exist is that which may exist in the perceiver.

In its aesthetic role, that same sign has a completely different character. It is no longer a value-less sign. In his writings on semiotics, Charles Morris points out that when an interpereter apprehends an aesthetic sign, he apprehends directly the thing designated by the sign.[8] It is, in essence, an iconic sign, rather than a non-iconic one. He notes, also, that the thing designated by an aesthetic sign (its designatum) is not a meaning, as in the case of the traditional communicative sign.[9] The aesthetic sign designates a value, not a meaning. Moreover, the value the sign designates when perceived is continually or perpetually inherent in the sign.

8. Charles Morris "Esthetics and the Theory of Signs," Journal of Unified Science, VIII (1939), p. 131

9. IBID.

The theatrical event, then, is a complex system of signs which has a dual character, and which functions in two distinctive ways. For example, the line or act that functions cognitively to identify the stage situation in terms of meanings simultaneously functions as an aesthetic sign with artistic, rather than conceptual, signification.

Basically, a director hopes to insure that the sign components of the drama are not simply conceptual and associational, but that they have in them the value

properties which permit them to function as aesthetic signs. Perhaps before attempting to make an application of this aesthetic sign function to the actual play-making process, it would be helpful to review the distinction between practical and aesthetic perception. Basically, the spectator who responds practically tends to view the art object in terms of how it applies to his situation and the implications it has for his personal well-being or status. In the case of an aesthetic response, the spectator responds to the art on its own terms and derives pleasure from the value properties inherent in the aesthetic sign which the total work and its constituent parts become. To illustrate the basic nature of the practical response, we might recall the now classic account of a 19th century performance in the Missouri Territory which was attended by several Sioux Indian chiefs. During the Grand Enchantment scene, when the lightening flashed and the shrieks of the dead mingled with the fury of the storm, the Sioux panicked and ran from the theatre. Having no previous theatrical experience, they had no choice but to identify the event on the basis of its relation to their personal safety. The response was a practical, rather than an aesthetic one. In the same vein, this writer recalls a personal friend who was a traveling salesman, and who came away from Death of a Salesman, insisting it had been one of the worst plays he had ever witnessed. In short, he saw himself in Willy Lohman, and what he saw released a flood of anxieties about his own future. He could not perceive Willy as a figure caught in the web of his own values, with his fears and fantasies serving as an intricately related system of aesthetic signs which erect the artistic form of that play. Rather than responding to the form for what is was, or for its values, he used it practically as a sign designating something regarding his personal welfare.

To use the classic terms, the individuals noted above found the characters

and events on the stage either pitiable or frightening, or both. The elements in the sign complex of the play functioned only in the traditional communicative sense--they possessed no value properties. Unfortunately, not enough had been done to enable the play ingredients to be prehended and utilized as aesthetic signs. There had been a failure (not completely the spectators') to make the play a recognizable artistic process in which events of a pitiable and fearful character are purified of their horror and terror by virtue of the artistically controlled expressive relationships they assume within the context of the play's form.

These illustrations of exclusively practical responses to theatre and the failure to respond to the play's ingredients as aesthetic signs implies that there are elements to which theatre practioners may need to give concerted attention, and which warrant consideration at this point.

A helpful approach to that task can be found in Morris' statement that "the artist often draws attention to the fact his work and the elements in it are aesthetic sign vehicles."[10] He points out that the artist deliberately sets out

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[10.] IBID., p. 137

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to insure the interpreter doesn't simply react to his work as an object or as a traditional cognitive sign. Pictures are framed or parts of the canvas are deliberately left unpainted; hence, the work can't be taken simply as a traditional sign which will trigger recollections of an actual landscape or call up meanings relevant to that subject. The problem, now, is to establish the theatrical counterpart of the condition Morris describes. First, of course, a play is enacted on a stage, and while that may call attention to its role as aesthetic sign, that is an external, mechanical factor peculiar to the theatrical mode. There are,

however, other things which might be considered. For one thing, it may be essential to keep the matter of conventions foremost in mind during the process of playmaking. This involves something more than the so-called conventions involving act curtains, asides, or devices used to indicate the passage of stage time. It involves factors such as the para-linguistic elements of gesture, voice, or facial expression which function as conventions and, consequently, serve to identify the form-producing character and action ingredients as aesthetic signs. Typical of the factors involved here are the syntactical conventions within the line that make it a deliberate poetical construct, rather than actual speech. If these items are blurred by insufficient definition, if they are neglected because of an exclusive emphasis on character, stage business, or picturization, the spectator may fail to be alerted to the fact he is viewing a system of aesthetic signs with inherent, appreciable values.

We might also consider the necessity of calling attention to form as form. It must be made apparent that the responses and incidents the spectator is perceiving are assuming special relationships that are form producing, and that they are not simply incidents that make the play resemble life. This can readily be illustrated by considering Durrenmatt's play, The Visit, in which the form is that of a ritual. In the play's fabricated universe, the elements of the dramatist's medium are orchestrated in such a manner that a ritual evolves. That ritual is not only the most appropriate and intimate way the spectator can be brought into contact with the play's narrative and its comments on justice, it is also a composite, value laden aesthetic sign that can be approached on its own terms and appreciated for its own sake. That being the case, the director who elects to stage The Visit, may have the responsibility of framing the scenes, regulating the tension patterns (rhythms), moulding the contextual atmosphere in ways that will deliberately call attention to the fact a ritual is evolving before the spectator as an aesthetic sign, for aesthetic comtemplation. Form must be made to reveal,

rather than veil, the artistic content and dimensions of the production.

Items such as these, and the myriad of other aesthetically based considerations which confront theatre practitioners, make the task of producing a play a formidible one. Formidible it may be, but it is also the most creative and stimulating area in which a director can hope to work.